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INTERPRETATION

Pentagon Is Wondering What Role to Give A-11

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The biggest mystery today about the A-11 mystery plane is what the Pentagon can do with it.

The billion-dollar wonder—which can fly higher and faster than any other plane of anybody's air force—may well have become obsolete just about the time President Johnson unveiled it before a surprised press-conference audience February 29.

It can do reconnaissance work over countries that do not have modern air defenses, according to Pentagon sources, but there are other planes that can do roughly the same and do it cheaper.

The Russians probably will be capable of shooting down the A-11 in the near future, if they are not now.

Secretary of Defense McNamara told reporters last week that the plane "is being developed as an interceptor" and refused to go beyond that.

Linked to Anti-Missiles

It is widely known, however, that Mr. McNamara believes it will be wasteful to buy a new interceptor unless he gets an effective anti-missile defense. He says, furthermore, that purchase of the Nike-X anti-missile missile will be "entirely contingent" upon congressional approval of his fallout shelter program. Congress just shelved that program, at least for this year.

Mr. McNamara's reasoning on the continental defense package is this: \$5 billion worth of shelters could save many scores of millions of lives during an attack. This easily justifies the cost, in Mr. McNamara's view.

Nike-X alone could save few lives, but in conjunction with shelters it could save enough to justify its \$15 billion to \$20 billion cost.

Without shelters and an effective missile defense, a better anti-bomber defense—that is, the new interceptor plane—could save relatively few lives. With shelters and Nike-X, however, an interceptor could justify its \$3 billion or \$4 billion cost.

Thus the A-11, as an interceptor, is first dependent on the shaky shelter program.

The A-11, which Mr. McNamara called "a magnificent technical achievement" might

be used as a bomber. There is evidence that that was one of its original purposes.

When the plane was designed in 1959, Air Force planners thought the best way to penetrate to Russian targets was to fly high and fast. The A-11, at well over 100,000 feet and 2,000 miles an hour, goes twice as high and twice as fast as any existing Air Force long-range bomber.

Since 1959 Russia has developed new defensive missiles, however, that have the potential to shoot down any high, fast airplane. If the Russian SAM-II anti-aircraft missile is as good as the American Nike-Hercules—and there is no reason why it cannot be made this good—it could easily handle the A-11.

In practice shots, the Hercules has intercepted missile warheads moving much faster and much higher.

Would Attack Low

The Air Force today is convinced that bombers could penetrate to Russian targets by flying low, however. Bombers in future years would plan to flash under Red radar a few hundred feet off the ground.

The A-11 could not do this, according to Pentagon technical men. Its wings were not built for low-level endurance. Also, its fuselage is relatively light and delicate. Low-level buffeting would tear it apart.

Its light construction makes it could not maneuver sharply at high speeds, and its slim fuselage could not carry all the complex detection devices the Air Force wants.

If the Air Force never buys a fleet of A-11s the country will not thereby suffer from a new weapons gap. The Air Force has other weapons in hand or on paper which could do all of these jobs better.

For reconnaissance there are satellites, the U-2 and a number of other aircraft.

For interception there is the F-106, the TFX and any number of proposed planes and air or ground-launched missiles.

For bombing there are existing low-level bombers, the TFX and the Air Force's proposed bomber, the "advanced manned precision strike system."

Air Force officers say there must be some future use for such a high-performance aircraft as the A-11. The Pentagon bosses, however, do not know today just what this might be.